

Sunday 2/26/2023: Gen 2:15-17, 3:1-7, Mt 4:1-11

Four days ago, on Ash Wednesday, I sent you a sermon about God creating earth creature Adam from the dust of the ground and breathing God's breath into Adam to give life.

And how God's breath, God's Spirit, connects with each one of us

Today we pick up the story of Adam in the garden of Eden with his partner, the woman, and face the first question of evil and suffering in the bible.

We then hear about Jesus in the wilderness and the temptation he faced

These stories take us to the heart of an age-old question about human suffering.

The questions I struggle most with as a hospital chaplain are

Why do people suffer, and where is God in the midst of suffering?

First, I think it's important that we explore the meaning of suffering

Suffering requires endurance or tolerance

It is usually not a one-time experience

But something that is persistently unpleasant, or even painful

Suffering can be imposed by oneself, or by another

Today, and throughout this season of Lent, we explore the reality of suffering as part of the human condition

even Jesus, the Christ, experienced suffering

And through Jesus, God also understands human suffering./ / /

One year ago I was assigned Douglas John Hall's book "God & Human Suffering" for class

I loved his perspective on this question of suffering, and was happily surprised I'd have an opportunity to use his work,

as the scriptures for today align well with Hall's material.

Hall presents that some forms of suffering belong in God's creation of human beings

Some forms of suffering are part of our design as humans

Suffering comes along with our process of becoming. (p. 57)

The creation story and Matthew's gospel both engage Hall's theory that life's struggle, the process of becoming, involves suffering

Hall presents four aspects of suffering that are part of human creation, the human condition

Those are: **Loneliness, Limits, anxiety, and temptation**

This suffering exists in the midst of us straying away from God's hope for us

The denial of God's presence with us and to us

The denial of God's call to each one of us

As we attempt to have more power and control over our lives

and struggle to allow God to be God within our process of becoming

The key to Hall's entire argument is that suffering and struggle, as part of our human design, must promote **meaningful life**

So egregious human acts of war, violence, oppression ...

These lie outside of what we're talking about today / / /

So let's consider loneliness...

Loneliness creates suffering because by design humans are intended for relationship

Loneliness is the opposite of relationship and love that God calls us toward

In creation God proclaims that it is not good for human Adam to be alone

So God creates animals and a human partner to accompany Adam through life

Experiencing loneliness inspires us to seek meaningful relationships

It's a feeling that tips us off that we we're missing a core part of our being

Which is relationship

/ / /

Limits: We live in a society that continuously strives to defy limits

Living as though the earth is limitlessly productive and resilient

Living as though our individual lives have no limits

We create a society where we can access anything,

where nothing is forbidden,

where medicine can keep our hearts beating and lungs breathing...

keep us "alive"... long past the time that our living has ended

Hall asks us to wonder how human beings under such conditions

Of limitlessness ever experience awe

Surprise

Or gratitude?

The stories in both Genesis and Matthew today explore limits.

Just after Jesus was baptized and the Spirit of God proclaimed

“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”

Jesus went out to the wilderness as many others had gone before him,

The wilderness... where everything is stripped away

Except for himself

In this wilderness the tempter came to push Jesus' limits

Jesus could have turned the stones into bread

He possessed the power to do great and miraculous things

However, Jesus fully embraced his humanness in this place of wilderness

And limited the use of his power / / /

Anxiety: Hall is not talking about chronic anxiety that reduces one's ability to live life abundantly

But he is referring to the human capacity to be aware of our condition

To contemplate the past, present and future of not only ourselves,

But of others, extending beyond our community and into the cosmos...

This incredible awareness causes anxiety as we face choices

And decision-making about how our actions impact ourselves and others

The woman experienced anxiety in the story of Genesis today as the serpent makes her aware of what she might be missing out on

The serpent is not evil, but good, created good as part of God's creation

And knowledge isn't necessarily evil either

But this awareness, this fear of missing out, creates anxiety within humans

As we struggle to make choices

The woman becomes anxious about what she might not see

About a God-like power that she could possess, but may not

And in the midst of this anxiety... she takes a bite / / /

When we move through anxiety, we are able to recognize hope

And experience comfort,

relief,

and even joy

Which is God's call to each one of us / / /

Finally we hear about temptation

The woman is tempted

Jesus is tempted

We are tempted

Temptation challenges us to decide

Temptation brings discomfort, even suffering, as we struggle

to choose righteousness, justice, and truth

And temptation also connects us with our human capabilities of freedom, decision-making, sacrifice, and restraint

Hall states that:

“Without temptation, human beings would lack the **challenge** that is **necessary**

for the development both of its **rational powers of discernment**

and its **moral capacities for goodness**” (p. 59). / / /

Loneliness... limits...anxiety... temptation

Forms of suffering that guide us in our becoming

I think of them like the bumpers that beginners use in bowling

To help them stay out of the gutter where all becomes lost

As we bump up against these forms of suffering throughout our lives,

perhaps we can consider them from a new perspective

“Life without suffering would be no life at all

As life depends in some mysterious way upon the struggle to be” (p. 60)

Becoming who we are, who we’re meant to be, who we want to become

This struggle often brings pain and suffering

Because we are aware, we are conscious, of the vastness of the cosmos

Within this struggle “we become active participants in our life process.

And because of our vast awareness,

We are reminded of God’s role in our becoming

We recognize that we can’t do it all on our own

As we navigate loneliness

Impose limits

Acknowledge our anxiety

And resist temptation

We create space for God / / /

“the temptation of Everyperson is to **have** their being

rather than having **to receive** it,

daily, like the manna of the wilderness or the daily bread of the Lord’s prayer” (81)

During this season of Lent

May we fully embrace our created humanness and the suffering of our becoming

May we acknowledge God’s loving presence with us and to us

In those spaces of suffering

As we face loneliness, limitations, anxiety and temptation

May we have the discernment and the courage,

Like Jesus,

To say “Away with you Satan”

And allow the angels of God to wait on us

Amen